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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 001235

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TAGS: [CM](#) [EAIR](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [KCOR](#) [KPKO](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#)  
PREL  
SUBJECT: BIYA READY FOR PEACEKEEPING; PROMISES MORE

REFORMS, AGAIN

REF: A. YAOUNDE 1227  
[1](#)B. IIR 6 825 0024 9  
[1](#)C. YAOUNDE 913  
[1](#)D. YAOUNDE 800

Classified By: Political Officer Tad Brown for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Talk of security--Cameroon's recent ACOTA training and threats from armed groups in Bakassi--dominated the Ambassador's December 19 meeting with Cameroonian President Paul Biya. Biya said Cameroon is ready to participate in a peacekeeping mission and expressed confidence that newly formed security units would secure the Bakassi region. However, he complained about corrupt and inept leadership in the military and throughout the government. Biya again promised forthcoming action on a slew of long-stalled initiatives--a new and smaller cabinet, a new, independent electoral commission, and the formation of a Senate and Constitutional Court--all of which he said would see positive movement in the first four months of 2009. End of summary.

Thanks for Security Help  
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[1](#)2. (C) Biya focused most of the 80-minute conversation on security issues. He was enthusiastic about recent ACOTA training for the nascent Cameroonian peacekeeping battalion (ref A) and said Cameroon is ready to participate in a peacekeeping operation. Biya repeatedly thanked the Ambassador for the USG's support to Cameroon's security sector, praising the Defense Attache's energetic efforts to provide Cameroon with everything from radios to small boats.

Corruption in the Military  
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[1](#)3. (C) Nevertheless, Biya expressed frustration with his senior military officials, making it clear he would dismiss the Admiral of the Navy and other senior officials in the coming months. He implicated (but did not explicitly state) that this frustration included Minister Delegate of Defense Remy Ze Meka. Biya said advisors had pressed him to change the country's military leadership at the same time he was attacking kleptocrats in civilian government, but he had demurred to avoid the risk that the dismissed officials would gang up. Comment: We presume Biya is referring to his dismissal of three particularly corrupt and ambitious ministers--Polycarpe Abah Abah, Urbain Olanguena and Jean Marie Atangana Mebara--in September 2007. At the time, there was speculation that they had colluded with other officials

to challenge Biya's leadership. End comment. Having now removed the civilian kleptocrats, Biya said he could now move against senior security officials. The Ambassador reminded Biya that the USG continues to enforce Proclamation 7750 and that it might be applicable to corrupt Cameroonian officials; Biya welcomed the move as a "second track" to his own anti-corruption efforts.

14. (C) Asked if he had received any feedback after the conference on corruption in the military that was hosted by the Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS)(ref c), Biya implied the conference had touched a nerve (saying the subject was "sensitive") and welcomed the offer of follow on programs focusing on governance of the armed forces. He opined that most of the military was honest and wanted to do a good job but that corruption was keeping the mid- and lower ranks from getting the supplies they needed. Illustrating the challenges he faces, Biya confided that Minister of Finance Essimi Menye recently alerted Biya to the Ministry of Defense's plan to purchase three helicopters at three times the prevailing prices. Biya said he told Essimi Menye to cancel the deal.

Threats from Bakassi  
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15. (S) Biya summarily dismissed the option of direct contact with the Bakassi Freedom Fighters, saying he did not want to give them credibility or a platform to advance their message, and expressing confidence that new security units modeled on the Rapid Response Battalions (BIR in the French acronym) would bring the Bakassi region under control. He was also concerned that the separatist Southern Cameroons

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National Council (SCNC) might link up with these groups to gain visibility. He acknowledged the need to be extra vigilant on security in the coming few months.

16. (S) In response to renewed threats from the Bakassi Freedom Fighters (ref b), Biya said the Government of Cameroon (GRC) had told fishermen in the region to stay home in the coming weeks for their own protection. Ambassador told Biya that DAO had been in contact with representatives of the Bakassi Freedom Fighters in order to obtain more information about their intentions and promised that the USG would continue to share any information obtained about the group. Biya did not object.

17. (S) Recalling the negotiations to free employees of the Bourbon Corp. (a support contractor for French oil company Total) taken hostage near Bakassi, Biya said the Government of France had sent an official to participate in the negotiations, but that Total had kept the GRC out of the talks. Biya added that the GRC had offered to return prisoners in an exchange but the hostage takers had refused. He also averred that the GRC special forces had been prepared to intervene but the government had decided not to use them. The President seemed eager to coordinate with Nigeria on shared security cooperation but was hesitant to engage with the Equato-Guineans saying "we do not get along with them" and that President Obiang "gives me trouble."

Economy  
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18. (C) Biya said he was very worried about Cameroon's economic outlook in the face of the global economic downturn, pointing out that prices have plummeted for commodities like oil, which is critical for the GRC's budget. Biya expressed particular disappointment with his Minister of Agriculture, Jean Nkuete, and also with the performance of his government in general, but did not convey a vision for how Cameroon could better respond to the economic challenges it faces. Showing the Ambassador a model Boeing airplane that he keeps on his desk, Biya said he had instructed the Prime Minister

to expedite relaunching the national airline, CAMAIR, which was recently liquidated as part of a troubled privatization attempt.

#### It's Tough to Find Good Help

19. (C) Admitting that he had made such promises before (ref d), Biya assured the Ambassador he would shuffle the cabinet and reduce its size "after the new year." He predicted the personnel of ELECAM would be announced before the end of the year and promised that the first four months of 2009 would be particularly "busy," with the establishment of the Senate and Constitutional Court. Again professing frustration at his government's poor performance, Biya complained that he was having trouble finding good people to appoint to the cabinet.

He praised Prime Minister Inoni as loyal but ineffective, and welcomed the Ambassador's suggestions for whom he might seek to include in his next government. Biya cited the need to strengthen democratic institutions and further decentralization, saying (as he has before) that he didn't know if he would run again for president in 2011 and that if he did he might not win.

#### Comment

10. (C) Biya claimed to recognize that the economy is suffering, that many Cameroonians are unhappy, and that there is a need for new personalities and new energy in leadership.

However, he didn't project new energy or vision. While he appeared in good health and was characteristically well briefed, Biya seemed more tired and distracted and less forceful than in the Ambassador's other meetings with him. As in other meetings, Biya was charming, engaged and appreciative of USG security assistance. Biya conceded that this was not the first time he had promised bold strokes on the size and effectiveness of government or even the Senate and Constitutional Court. Given his record of slow decisionmaking and incremental change and his questionable commitment to democratic reform, we are skeptical.

11. (C) Biya expressed a genuine fondness for President

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Bush and appreciated the democratic process underway this year in American presidential politics. He was particularly eager to keep up USG security cooperation, commenting that we should not feel threatened in this area by French military cooperation with Cameroon. With the ACOTA training completed, we will now work with the Department, the United Nations and our Cameroonian contacts to help the GRC step up its contributions to regional security.

GARVEY